

Are We Interfering Unduly?

A critical review of this country's foreign intelligence organizations is said to be under consideration by President Nixon. They cost too much (several billion dollars a year), and their performance has too often been seriously at fault. At important turns, they have provided inadequate or misleading information.

The latest example of this was seen in the invasion of Laos. The preparatory intelligence indicated that there would not be massive resistance. But that is precisely what Saigon's forces ran into—35,000 of Hanoi's troops as against 17,000 of Saigon's. The result was a rout.

That intelligence failure had been preceded by others. One concerned the supposed presence of American prisoners of war at Sontay. An elaborate and dangerous raid was undertaken; it was fruitless. Then, there was the supposed presence of a major Hanoi headquarters just over the Cambodian border. It was never found. Also, the massive Tet offensive some time back was altogether unexpected.

Indeed, the Vietnam war as a whole may fairly be characterized as a failure in intelligence. Thus, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker gave an interview in Saigon this week, in which he said, "We really didn't understand the kind of war we were engaged in. So it was difficult, it took time." And this after the notorious experience of the French in Vietnam, the British in Malaysia, and others elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Despite our costly intelligence, we just didn't know what we were getting into.

But perhaps more momentous for the future is what the Central Intelligence Agency is commonly believed to be doing in other countries, particularly those in Latin America.

All kinds of chicanery and violence are arbitrarily attributed to the C.I.A. That agency is represented as practically omnipresent and omnipotent, as well as totally unscrupulous and malicious. It would appear that in Latin America, for example, there is a prevalent obsession with the C.I.A., and everything adverse—with the possible exception of hail storms and hangnails—is blamed on the

C.I.A., much as, in our own country, a Communist plot is seen by some as accounting for anything from an early voting age to a late spring.

However, it is not only the feverishly imaginative and the bitterly anti-North American in Latin America who charge that the C.I.A. is interfering in the internal affairs of the countries to the south of us. This is also alleged by persons well informed, well balanced, and well disposed to us.

They are troubled by what they see as the intensification of Yankee economic imperialism in the Latin American world. This, they say, is what is effected in the last analysis by all our aid and development programs. Such undertakings are professedly designed to help the economic, social, and political progress of the indigent Latin American masses. But in fact they do nothing of the sort. Rather, they serve the immediate advantage of the already highly privileged oligarchies in the various countries, and enable North Americans to exert still more control over Latin America and wring still more wealth from it.

But where does the C.I.A. come into it? More and more people in Latin America are convinced, rightly or wrongly, that the C.I.A. is safeguarding the inordinate North American economic interest in the Latin American countries by secretly acting to keep complaisant regimes in power and to destroy native reformist or revolutionary movements. The alleged means run the gamut from the arrangement of political murder to the infiltration of the universities. It has been said that a turn to the left in Chile, Peru, and Bolivia has been facilitated by resentment of C.I.A. interference in the domestic affairs of those countries.

Sorting fact from fantasy in such matters is not easy. But at the very least it must be recognized that a popular impression of C.I.A. intervention in the internal business of friendly nearby countries is damaging to American prestige. If, while we are fighting a bootless battle on the other side of the world, we are alienating our neighbors by meddling in their private business, we are making an incalculably expensive mistake.